

O 211617Z FEB 06  
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9846  
INFO THE MID EAST PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS TUNIS 000373

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KMPI](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [XT](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: HAMAS VICTORY: DEMOCRATIC REFORM IMPLICATIONS

¶1. Summary: Pro-democracy contacts from across the region were shocked by the magnitude of the recent Hamas electoral victory, but at the same time were impressed by the genuinely democratic process. Looking at the impact that these events could have on democratic reform in the region, the democracy activists draw several conclusions:

-- Elections can bring real change. The sweeping victory and acceptance of the results by Fatah send a strong message on democracy's potential to both governments and people across the region.

-- Change can be a mixed bag. While activists call the elections a 'turning point' for democratic development in the region, they wonder about the commitment of Islamist groups to democracy once in power.

-- Moderates aren't ready, Islamists are. With few exceptions across the region, moderate political forces are in disarray and would not do well if democratic elections were held today. Islamist groups are better organized, with a substantive message and a loyal constituency base.

-- Autocrats will capitalize on fear. Governments will use the specter of Hamas's victory to resist democratic reform, arguing that it plays into the hands of extremists; whereas, the long-term solution is for the governments to open up more.

-- The USG and others need to maintain pressure on governments to undertake real reforms and provide assistance to moderates so that they will be able to compete with Islamists and existing regimes. End summary.

¶2. The MEPI Regional Office canvassed 16 democracy activist contacts from across the region (Bahrain, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestinian Territories, Tunisia, Yemen) regarding the recent Hamas victory and its likely impact on democratization efforts. Below are the common themes that emerged from the responses of these activists, most of whom have participated in BMENA-sponsored events. Some of the views appear inconsistent, but we believe they accurately reflect the state of the debate taking place in civil society at the moment.

-----  
Good Election, Surprising Results  
-----

¶3. Our democracy contacts were unanimous in judging the Palestinian electoral process as generally transparent and fair. They were equally unanimous in their surprise at the magnitude of the Hamas victory. The most common reasons offered for the results were:

-- Hamas's victory should be seen as a vote against the corrupt, ineffective, and chaotic governance of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Whereas Hamas has the solid ideological support of some 30 per cent of the Palestinians, the rest of its support was simply a non-ideological vote against the PA.

-- The Israeli occupation is to blame, as it gradually

destroyed the PA's infrastructure and credibility with Palestinians. In a twist on this theme, some contacts said the victory should therefore be seen as the culmination of the PA's failed attempts to achieve a comprehensive settlement with Israel.

-- A Hamas victory could not have been possible without the blessing of the USG, given its intelligence capacity and influence over all the political players.

-----  
Democratic 'Turning Point', But with a Twist  
-----

¶4. Several activists called the elections a 'turning point.' They believe that Palestinians have demonstrated that fundamental change is possible through the democratic process. The Hamas victory, combined with Fatah's acceptance of the results, presents a clear challenge to other governments in the region to accept the principle of the people's right to change their governments. No one is predicting an imminent wave of democratic reform as a result of the elections, but most of our contacts stated that these elections were proof of positive momentum. Some even called it 'irreversible.'

¶5. At the same time, the fact that Hamas was the victor poses a dilemma for the same democracy activists - what to do when you like the process, but not the results. Our contacts feel that the Hamas results, combined with the strong showing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt's recent parliamentary elections, could have significant implications throughout the region. Many of our contacts remain highly skeptical of the Islamist commitment to democracy once in power. They fear that the Muslim Brotherhood/Hamas results are galvanizing other Islamist groups to push for more democracy in the hopes that elections will allow them to advance their conservative agenda.

-----  
Moderates Aren't Ready, Islamists Are  
-----

¶6. This fear of the Islamist forces is clearly linked to our contacts' view of the current balance of power between Islamists and moderates. Islamist political parties/organizations are the most potent opposition political force in almost all Arab countries, despite efforts by governments to rein them in. In free and fairly contested elections, these parties would in many cases be elected to power. At the same time, most governments have been successful at keeping moderate political parties and NGOs weak and without the means of creating a popular base. While activists admit that this sort of competition is an aspect of democracy they must accept, they are worried that the lack of a level playing field could result in a domino effect and an Islamization of the region.

-----  
Leaders Exploit Hamas Example, but Democracy IS Answer  
-----

¶7. Our contacts already see governments across the region using the Muslim Brotherhood/Hamas results as an argument to 'go slow' on democracy, with the postponement of Egyptian local elections the clearest example. They expect autocratic governments will use the specter of the Islamist domino effect to push back against Western pressure to undertake serious democratic reforms. This is the wrong conclusion to draw from the Palestinian elections, they contend, which were a major step towards democratic reform. The only way to defeat Islamists and other extremists in the long run is to open up. Beyond the ballot box, democracy requires the development of a democratic culture, rule of law, accountable governments, and a broad range of viable political choices, not just autocrats vs. extremists.

¶8. The democracy activists we spoke to offered several common suggestions for USG and Western governments:

-- Maintain pressure on Arab governments to democratize their systems, including allowing all opposition groups to operate freely.

-- Make foreign economic aid contingent on Arab governments' efforts to democratize and the outcomes of these efforts;

-- Provide assistance to strengthen moderate political parties and independent civil society;

-- Maintain momentum for the reform process in BMENA;

-- Insist on independent international observers for all future elections.

HUDSON